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ABSTRACT

To investigate the initial experiences of the various Even Start programs, a project developed a survey that was sent to program coordinators in Ohio. It asked open-ended questions to get descriptions and perceptions of situations that preceded turning point events and the turning point events themselves. Data from eight programs highlighted their diversity. Their turning points were varied, but several themes were identified that seemed significant in successfully achieving turning points. Staff development was critical to successful early program development. Both self-study and development of action plans were effective in increasing staff understanding, facilitating program start-up, and solving problems related to early program delivery. Several programs mentioned that things did not begin to fall into place until appropriate facilities were found. Several program coordinators found that nurturing communication with other complementary agencies was a definite turning point for their programs. State coordinator recommendations for the planning stage were as follows; developing firm, written agreements with cooperating agencies; securing a site; and clarifying with cooperating agencies that provide staff what kind of persons are needed. Insisting that staff experience training and plan instruction together as a team and giving parents ownership of the program in every way possible were recommended. (The instrument is appended.) (YLB)

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TURNING POINTS IN EVEN START PROGRAMS

OCCASIONAL PAPER #4
JUNE, 1994

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TURNING POINTS IN EVEN START PROGRAMS

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The purpose of this investigation and report is to describe turning points experienced by the various Even Start Programs in Ohio as they established themselves as viable family literacy programs in their communities. By turning points we mean the time and/or event(s) that had a significant and positive effect in establishing the program. Turning points could include the times when families begin to attend regularly, cooperation among agencies is developed, the program mission becomes clear and attainable to staff, etc. By identifying and describing these turning point events, we hope that future programs might benefit from the accumulated experience of existing programs.

This report does not attempt to judge or evaluate the actions or decisions of the programs that were contacted in this study. Any attempt to draw evaluative conclusions about any individual or group of programs is inappropriate and goes beyond the scope, nature, and intent of the present study.

METHOD/APPROACH

In order to investigate the initial experiences of the various Even Start programs (ES), we developed a survey instrument (see appendix) and sent it to ES program coordinators in Ohio. In the survey, the ES coordinators were asked a variety of open-ended questions aimed at getting descriptions and perceptions of situations that preceded turning point events and the actual turning point events themselves. The survey was mailed in December, 1993 to each ES site in Ohio. A second survey was sent in February, 1994 to those projects that did not respond to the initial mailing. This report represents the responses of those programs that responded to the survey.

FINDINGS

The data will be reported in the form of brief case studies, ordered alphabetically by program, for each program that described its turning point.

Barberton ES Program

The Barberton program has identified several turning points that have occurred throughout the four-year life of the project. Significant among these was the development of cohesion among the staff, understanding by the staff of the entire program, and a sense of ownership over the program by the staff. This was accomplished through ongoing staff development activities that, although aimed at particular components of the ES program, were attended by all staff

members.

Other turning points included finding adequate transportation for families and developmentally appropriate childcare for younger children and reducing paperwork demands on the staff. These were accomplished through amending the ES budget, collaborating with the University of Akron, and introducing a computerized tracking system to ease the paperwork burden.

According to Dee Siegferth, program coordinator, the turning points for the program occurred after its first year. Dee believes that close cooperation within the staff itself and the collaboration among the ES program and other agencies allowed the turning points to be achieved. Assistance from the state, especially from State Consultant Connie Ackerman, has been very helpful in the Barberton program and has been instrumental in the successful establishment of new programs in the state.

Cleveland ES Program -- Family Life Education

The Cleveland program occurs in two sites -- an elementary school and an early childhood developmental center. According to co-coordinator Connie Sapin, the establishment of these sites and the development of cooperative working relationships between staff and teachers was the point at which "staff morale, student ownership, and consistent attendance fell into place."

This turning point had several positive consequences: continuity of curriculum between site staff (classroom

teachers and day care staff) and ES with shared resources; staff morale improvement as permanent locations were determined; ability of parents, teachers, and ES staff to work toward common objectives; greater potential for networking; greater feedback from site staff and students; more referrals from site staff; increased and regular attendance; greater perception and appreciation from site staff for the importance of families as learning units.

This turning point was largely accomplished through the ES staff emphasizing positive contacts with the site staff; seeking teacher input; and inviting teachers into classes to teach, participate, or share resources.

According to Connie, any way to identify school administrators who are truly interested in parental involvement and who see families as the units they themselves need to be working with would surely increase the likelihood of achieving this turning point more quickly. For one site the establishment of an appropriate location was settled within six months of the program establishment. Because the second had to move three times before finding its adequate and collaborative site, nearly a year went by before the turning point occurred.

Dayton ES Program

According to Mattie White of the Dayton ES Program, the turning point for that program occurred when staff and families began to take ownership of the program. Consistency in routines, procedures, and program implementation resulted in

improved staff morale and a greater sense of ownership, particularly in recruitment and retention. As a result, staff is collaborating at a grass roots level to develop strategies for assisting families in crisis. A portion of staff meeting time is devoted to Family Case Studies, and a Family Literacy and Parenting Education Resource room has been established in the central office building.

At the same time, families began to invest themselves in and exercise some control over the program. This occurred through families networking and bonding with other families and learning to network with staff and collaborating agencies. Families at the six sites elected representatives to the Even Start Advisory Board.

An indicator of the achievement of this turning point has been the increase in enrollment experienced at all sites. This turning point occurred after the program had been in operation, and, according to Mattie, was developed through the efforts and perseverance of the staff, in-service training for staff and participants, development of an integrated curriculum, and coordination with collaborating agencies and media coverage.

Great Oaks ES Program

According to Mary Lou Chalupa of the Great Oaks ES program, no particular turning point seemed to characterize the Great Oaks Program's initial operations. Progress has been continual and ongoing. Client satisfaction with the program and its general popularity have led to the success

and continued growth of the program.

Keys to the success of the Great Oaks program have been cooperation and credibility with other agencies; continued recruitment of families; cohesiveness of staff; and personal commitments to each individual student. Mary Lou feels that this gradual success had to come from within the program itself. Outside help would not have been valuable.

Kettering ES Program

Cindy Westfall, coordinator of the Kettering ES Program, reports that the initial turning point was finding families to participate in the program, "... getting families through the door the first time was difficult. Referrals were rare in the early stages." Things changed when the school year began, and parents registering for ABLE classes learned about ES. Also, coordination with other agencies such as the Miami Valley Literacy Council, Project READ, and the Montgomery County Department of Human Services resulted in additional referrals. The coordination with the agencies and the information provided to the public were the key elements of this turning point.

The initial recruitment activities resulted in further recruitment as participants brought other parents to the ES program. The initial group of parents "gave voice to the program that staff could not provide."

The turning point occurred approximately one year into the program. Knowledgeable staff members who could spot potential candidates for ES were important contributors to

achieving this turning point.

Lakewood ES Program

For the Lakewood program the identification and acquisition of a suitable facility was the turning point. According to Karen McPhail and Cheryl Selak, program coordinators, negotiations between the Lakewood Board of Education and the Lakewood Hospital led to the ES program's use of a state-of-the-art child care facility that was centrally located and thereby convenient for clients and that was able to provide nutritious, hot, free meals for families.

The successful collaboration with the hospital led to several other significant enhancements of the program. First, the collaboration put the program in touch with other agencies, organizations, and initiatives in the community that allowed for further coordination and visibility. The collaboration has also supported the ES program's obligation to obtain in-kind contributions from other organizations.

A major result of the ES-hospital collaboration is the regular attendance the program enjoys. Moreover, Karen and Cheryl note that because the families appreciate the use of such a good facility, the families have taken greater ownership in planning and implementing special events in the center. Moreover, the positive effects of the turning point have been maintained.

Essential to the success of this turning point was the mutual interest and sincere desire to collaborate that was manifested by both parties. Personal support from the

superintendent of the Lakewood schools and the CEO of the Lakewood Hospital were also key factors in the successful negotiation. This turning point occurred approximately 12 months into the program itself; Karen and Cheryl are unsure that anything could have been done to speed up the process. Apparently, a certain amount of time is necessary for the program to settle in, for contacts to be made, and for negotiations to occur before a turning point such as this can be take place.

Northwest Local ES Program

According to Forest Kuhn, coordinator of the Northwest ES program, the addition of a third staff member and the acquisition of a mobile classroom, both of which occurred about a year into the program, were the major turning points. These changes allowed each staff member to focus on a given area of the ES mission (early childhood, adult education, and parenting) and to begin implementing their plan of operation for a rural program in earnest. Before this point, service was extremely limited because a staff of two was providing all instruction in individual homes spread across a large area. They simply could not do more.

This turning point was preceded by a self study in which the plan of action was devised. According to Forest, a turning point such as the one experienced by the Northwest program requires time for the staff to get to know one another and to identify areas of strengths. Moreover, time is required for the program to become acquainted with and

introduce itself to the community. In this case, this essential activity of "setting the stage" required about 9 to 12 months to occur.

Rolling Hills ES Program

Mary Ellen Ontko, director of the Beech Grove Family Development Center, reports that the program is approaching a turning point. According to Mary Ellen that turning point is the coordination with other agencies, especially the on-site programs, to provide referrals for the ES program, to coordinate ways to help families, and through the on-site program, to offer a wide variety of services.

This turning point, the collaboration between ES and other agencies at the Family Development Center, afforded greater visibility to the ES program and resulted in greater participation in the services offered by ES. Moreover, collaborative opportuniites have led to more effective interventions for certain children than would be possible from just one program.

The keys to this turning point were the understanding of the ES program that developed among collaborating agencies and the immediacy of the collaboration between programs and staffs. The turning point took about 4 months to develop.

The collaboration characteristic in this program began with the development of positive relationships between agencies and individuals. This requires a certain amount of time before fruitful collaboration and the turning point can

occur.

Other Responding ES Programs

Three other ES programs, Alliance, Canton, and Cincinnati, responded to the survey. Since these programs are relatively new, the coordinators did not feel that they could adequately address the question of turning points. Janet Shaw, former coordinator of the Alliance program, noted that hiring staff is the most significant activity her program has accomplished so far. This has allowed further planning for the program to occur. Janet noted that the slow-paced bureaucratic procedures in hiring and other institutional functions have been a hindrance to the implementation of the program; any way to speed up these processes would improve the function of the program.

Jane Meyer, coordinator for the Canton program, notes that the ongoing support of the Canton City schools and the resources available from within the schools have provided major assistance in getting the ES program off to a strong start.

Carolyn Moore, coordinator of the Cincinnati program, reports that regular staff in-service and workshop training that has allowed the staff to identify goals and develop a workable plan for the program has been the early turning point for her program. With goals and plans established, the staff has been able to focus on program delivery issues. Carolyn notes that the development of forms on a "trial and error" basis has been a concern and suggests that a clear-

inghouse of forms kept in Columbus could help newly established programs identify the types of data that need to be collected and how the data can be collected.
(State Coordinator's Note: A three-notebook collection of forms from all the projects is currently avaiable; the next task is to consolidate some or identify the most useful.)

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

These brief individual reports highlight the diversity that is characteristic of the Ohio ES programs. Because of the diverse nature of the programs, their turning points have themselves varied. Nevertheless, we have identified several themes that seem to be significant in successfully achieving turning points in ES programs.

Staff

It appears that staff development is critical to successfully negotiating early development of ES programs. Issues within staff development include: 1) hiring and informing staff about the nature and purpose of ES; 2) providing appropriate in-service training; 3) developing a sense of cohesiveness and common purpose among the diverse specialities within ES; and 4) encouraging the staff to take ownership in the ES program through defining the mission for each ES program, engaging in intensive planning to accomplish that mission, and developing coordination and consistency in plan implementation.

A knowledgeable, proficient, and collegial staff is

crucial to the success of ES. ES coordinators need to involve themselves heavily in staffing the program, and the staff must be involved in developing workable plans and procedures for the program. Early success can be achieved by paying close attention to staff selection. Staff can then plan specific aspects of the program. This gives them a sense of ownership in the program that will propel their efforts to overcome obstacles to successful implementation. Moreover, weekly joint planning fosters the development of collegial relationships, which is particularly critical for programs like ES, since staff members represent several disciplines.

Planning

We recommend that ES programs consider both self-study and the development of specific action plans as vehicles for increasing staff understanding, facilitating program start-up, and solving specific problems related to the early phases of program delivery. Self-study can achieve two important goals: 1) staff members can develop the global view of the program necessary for collaboration; and 2) problematic aspects of programs can be identified. Action plans, complete with lists of tasks, timelines, and persons responsible, can provide blueprints to enable successful resolution of problems or challenges.

Particular emphasis in planning should be paid to finding and outfitting needed facilities, developing and nurturing contacts with complementary agencies in the area,

and developing specific plans for recruiting participants in the program. Moreover, planners should note that the three issues defined above are not discrete factors; considerable overlap exists among them. For example, contacts with other agencies may facilitate the finding of facilities and recruiting efforts.

Facilities

Several programs mentioned that things did not begin to fall into place until appropriate facilities were found. Given the nature of ES programs, facilities and other logistical concerns such as transportation will play large roles in the ultimate success of the program.

Potential facilities should be secured before an ES proposal is developed. If this is not possible, we suggest that ES coordinators, along with newly hired staff, quickly define the type of facilities they will need to accomplish their mission and the material resources required to properly put the facility into working order. This may be facilitated by contacting already existing programs to find the strategies they employed to accomplish this goal.

Coordination with Other Agencies

Several ES program coordinators found that nurturing communication with other complementary agencies was a definite turning point for their programs. The cooperation among agencies, in particular, facilitated the acquisition of facilities, sharing of resources, recruitment of ES participants, greater awareness of the ES program within the

community, and greater levels of mutual support and appreciation among staffs of the different agencies. Certainly, we can assume that as time goes on the networking among ES and other agencies will continue to reap benefits for all programs and especially for program participants and the community in general. We suggest that ES coordinators identify as soon as possible those agencies that share similar missions and participants as ES, make contact with the agencies, and nurture ongoing communication and mutual support with them. Moreover, whenever possible, staff members from related agencies should serve on each other's advisory groups or together on a community team.

Although this was not mentioned as an actual turning point issue, we feel that the continued refinement of the ES form bank may be a significant aid to new and existing programs as they deal with the federal and state requirements and required reports for ES. The bank should include forms used by the various projects, categorized by function. Any program wishing to view contents of the bank could request copies of a designated category of forms.

CONCLUSION

Getting off to a strong start is important for programs such as Even Start. Given the enormity of starting a new program from the ground up, it is not difficult to get so bogged down in detail and bureaucratic concerns that the accomplishment of the primary mission of the program is delayed or even lost. Reaching that initial turning point

confirms for programs that they are indeed on their way to achieving their goals. Hopefully the turning points described in this report will alert new and perhaps foundering programs to some of the issues that need attention in order to make that initial leap into the actual delivery of services to ES participants.

COMMENTS FROM THE STATE COORDINATOR

The purpose of attempting to identify turning points is to give direction to new projects on what they might expect to experience in getting established and what sorts of activities seem to push fledgling programs out of the nest. In this paper, program coordinators have had the opportunity to describe what they consider to be the activities that led to a sense of security and unified purpose. As the statewide coordinator who has been able to observe growth in projects for the past two years, I would like to suggest ways for programs to position themselves to reach turning points earlier.

In the planning stage:

1. Develop with cooperating agencies firm, written agreements outlining exactly what each agency will contribute and receive from the overall Even Start project. Too often, program planners collect general letters of support and then find themselves trying to specify working relationships at the same time they are trying to hire staff, recruit, order equipment, and so on. Save time and effort by getting specific agreements first.

2. Secure a site based not only on convenience but also, perhaps more importantly, on the commitment of the building administrator. An administrator who will sell your program to parents walking down the hallway and who will enlist the support of his or her building staff will move your project months ahead of the administrator who does not

recruit and who lets other building staff complain about having to share space with Even Start. Again, get a written agreement as to the commitment of space. Too often, Even Start projects have had to almost start over simply because a site was not firmly committed.

3. Clarify with cooperating agencies that provide staff (most likely ABE and preschool programs) what kind of persons are needed to make a holistic approach to serving disadvantaged families succeed. And clarify that the Even Start coordinator needs the right to reject instructors who cannot work effectively in Even Start.

4. Don't wait until everything is perfectly in place. The program will experience periods of stumbling, and they might as well be encountered sooner as later. I've seen a project serve 40 families within a month and half of receiving notice of acceptance and a project serve no one eight months after receiving notice of acceptance. Undoubtedly, there were differences in the amount of planning that preceded start-up, but there is also the fact that the first program simply jumped in and started serving families.

5. As staff are hired, ask them about their attitudes toward instructional issues that can make Even Start sink or swim. What do they believe about assessment, about how adults learn to read, about methods of instruction, about the use of workbooks, about the use of real-life materials, about willingness to plan instruction as a team, about the

purpose and value of home visits? Staff who cannot agree on most of these matters and who are not flexible will keep the program from moving forward -- and will keep coordinators awake at night.

6. Don't start from scratch in recruiting families. Go to ABE classes, Chapter I parent meetings, Head Start parent meetings; send notices by way of public school and Head Start children. And as you recruit, be clear about what Even Start provides and expects from participants. There is no value in recruiting families who do not want the entire Even Start package. Also think about ways to introduce parents gradually into the program by first introducing them to the components they do want (most frequently, GED preparation) and then adding the other components once they have a sense of commitment. If families are not successfully recruited fairly quickly, staff can become demoralized. It's no fun to learn that if you build it, they won't necessarily come.

During implementation:

1. Insist that staff experience training as a team and plan instruction together as a team. Staffing patterns in Even Start can be complicated -- adult educators, parent educators, early childhood educators, child care aides, some working at a central location and some working in homes, some hired by the Even Start fiscal agent and some working for cooperating agencies. This expectation has to be communicated to cooperating agencies and to staff being inter-

viewed, and it needs to be included in those written agreements mentioned above. Some projects have spent months in frustration because staff did not have a shared sense of purpose.

2. Give parents ownership of the program in every way possible. Involve them in developing and carrying out recruitment plans. Ask them to write orientation materials and to provide orientation to new families. Ask them what they would like to learn about their children, about parentting, about health, about job preparation, about other training opportunities. Examples of what can result include Barberton where parents attend a weight reduction class, Kettering where families are remodeling an old house, Cleveland where parents mobilized for playground improvement at their elementary school, Canton where parents are selecting and shopping for the computers they will purchase for their classroom. Obviously this requires the flexible staff, referred to above, who can stand back and watch the parents go. Giving parents ownership fosters commitment and steady attendance. The program grows and staff are energized.

These are practices in programs that have gotten off to strong starts and in programs that arrived at these practices after months of floundering. Perhaps by knowing of them early on, you can avoid some of the loss of time and energy that has frustrated others who had no one to learn from as they struggled to establish family literacy programs.

APPENDIX

Even Start Survey

"Turning Points"

Program Location_____

Coordinator_____

Person completing form_____

Almost every family literacy project reports difficulty in getting started and established. Often there is a turning point when things begin to click. Please describe your program's turning point(s) by answering the following questions.

1. Describe the turning point (e.g., families begin to attend regularly, agencies begin to cooperate, families take ownership, staff morale improves). That is, what happened?

2. What impact did this turning point have on your overall program? How do you know? Has the impact been sustained?

3. How far along in your program did this turning point occur?

4. What factors contributed to your program's achieving this turning point?

5. Would support from others have helped you achieve this turning point sooner? If so, please describe.